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ABSTRACT

The role of an affirmative action officer is seen to be an effective link between sociological theory/research and practice. The author describes her experience as the affirmative action officer at Lehigh University by citing origins, functions, strains, and conflicts surrounding the position. She was able to test theories about power, conflict, and social change from a variety of value perspectives. She explains how her sociological training provided many skills particularly suited to the role, including quantitative and qualitative research methods, ability to detect adverse effects (latent consequences) of employment policies, and innovative management techniques. Her conclusions are that the sociology practitioner can help factor out the universals from the personal and institutional characteristics with which effective affirmative action is associated. Insight gained from serving in the role can contribute to more viable solutions to institutional sexism and racism. (Author/AV)

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AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: FIELD LABORATORY FOR SOCIOLOGISTS

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AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: FIELD LABORATORY FOR SOCIOLOGISTS

After four years of teaching innovative (more or less) courses for sociology and social work students, I embarked on a career shift to academic administration in the role of affirmative action officer. This shift occurred through the "push" of wanting to avoid the tenure trap which lay ahead and the "pull" of being in a position to implement some of the theories expounded in the classroom. The opportunity to test some of the formulations about the creative use of conflict, redistribution of power and institutionalization of change agents proved irresistible.

On the heels of completing a study of the status of women faculty at a large, multi-campus private university, (Liss, 1975) I was ripe for the offer to try my skills at what seemed by comparison a field laboratory: a single-campus, small, prestigious, formerly all-male engineering school expanded to include liberal arts, education, business and women students. When asked in my final interviews why I was interested in coming to Lehigh, I responded: "Because it is the heart of the corporate elite and if change is to occur anywhere it must happen here." Now, one and a half years later, I am more convinced than ever that it is essential for women and minorities to infiltrate the board rooms and wield whatever influence they have among the decision-makers

while bringing more diverse staff aboard through affirmative action recruitment and hiring.

But it is not enough to move from the theoretical to the empirical, from studying power theories to applying them. The important and unusual, if not unique, aspect of the Sociological Practice section is the feedback between the theories and the application. The real challenge is to be able to stand back from the activity, examine what is happening, and relate the outcome to a theoretical stance. One example of this is the analysis of role strain on affirmative action officers which became manifest after several months of observing differing perceptions of what the role was expected to accomplish. (Liss, 1975) ("Affirmative Action Officers: Cops, Robbers, Puppets, Spies or Change Agents?" Several theories were applied to help predict the likelihood of effective change given the degree of role conflict.)

This paper is designed to explore the ways in which sociologists in particular can contribute to making affirmative action work by serving in the role designated "affirmative action officer" as mandated by Executive Order 11246. (See Appendix A)

An underlying assumption is that the system is open enough to respond to pressures from within and outside the university. The open system can be based on elitist theories that the corporate-military-educational complex only reallocates power or resources when threats of disruption to the social order emerge, (Piven and

Cloward, 1966) or the pluralist assumption that coalitions can form when there is sufficient interest and timeliness of issues. Under the pluralist assumptions, coalitions can affect the outcome of decisions through persuasion, exercise of power within specialized issue areas and legitmization of self-selected leaders (Polsby, 1963). Elitist theories, on the other hand, would predict that more radical measures would be necessary to alter the course of decisions (and nondecisions) which incrementally have reduced the options in policy choices by means of sequential small steps. (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970).

The theoretical assumptions ruled out by the above include those who perceive a closed system, with few or no options to centralized interlocking power elites. In other words, there must be room for grass roots participation and input for the role of affirmative action officer to have any viability for systemic change. Hiring a lone individual as an institutionalized change agent would have no plausibility if there were no support groups to sustain this externally mandated role.

To some extent, in the abstract at least, all segments of the university can be expected to be supportive of the universal pledge to practice equal employment opportunity. From the moment the abstract principle gets translated into a job description and structured into the table of organization, however, some groups become more or less disaffected. In an earlier paper I have traced the differing expectations of faculty, administrators, students, women and minoirites vis-a-vis the affirmative action officer. (Liss, 1975).

For the purposes of this paper, the considerable degree of role strain will be stated as a given and the capabilities of sociologists to cope with this fertile field will be enumerated.

First, at the point of selection the sociologist can gain greater legitimacy for the role by virtue of having the doctorate, particularly in the eyes of faculty and academic administrators. Compared to personnel officers, few of whom have faculty status, a better opportunity exists to gain influence over the myriad personnel decisions affecting faculty recruitment, selection, retention, promotion, termination and tenure. At best, the affirmative action officer can help identify the covert forms of discrimination that affect routine decisions, but cannot single-handedly root them out. Yet, many position descriptions locate the affirmative action officer in the personnel department, a certain path to ineffectiveness over faculty and department chairpersons, unless a strongly committed dean or vice-president assumes major responsibility. Indeed, given the extreme hierarchical structure anyone less than a tenured full professor starts out handicapped. But only when the position is created on a part-time basis has it tended to be filled by the tenured senior faculty member (who is predominantly white male). (Gemmell, 1974). The profile of the full-time affirmative action officer tends to be drawn disproportionately from groups with marginal academic status: white women, black men, some few black women and hispanic men and women. Although sociology is the major background for a good proportion of affirmative action officers,

not many have the Ph.D. Other related disciplines, including psychology, social work, human relations, political science, ed-ucational administration and organizational behavior have been found to be most prevalent among existing affirmative action officers. (Gemmell). This field, then, is largely untried by Ph.D. sociologists particularly senior women and minorities.

Second, the variety of work-related skills required is often found in the sociologist. Ability to use a computer-based personnel data system is essential to generate reports for government and internal use. Generating a utilization analysis is little more than a frequency distribution by race and by sex of employees in various job categories. Comparing the workforce to availability pools of qualified candidates in the relevant labor force requires studying census data by occupation and, increasingly, adapting already prepared tabulations of available personnel in each discipline and subfield. In addition to quantitative social research methods so vital to the position, there is ample opportunity to utilize qualitative methods to observe and analyse group interactions and to describe the climate as perceived by different constituencies. Sociological methods are most helpful to determining in what direction change must occur in order to have effective systemic linkage.

For example, affirmative action guidelines require careful analysis of policies that may be "fair in form or neutral on their face but have adverse effects on women and minorities." This concept is difficult for most faculty, administrators and personnel directors to grasp, but second-nature to the sociologist trained to look for latent consequences. Such policies permeate universities, as well as other bureaucracies, ranging from maternity leave to tenure policies.

For example, why should a woman be asked to submit a request for "maternity leave of absence" from her physician citing the dates she anticipates being out of work when many factors may intervene such as miscarriage, premature birth, or delayed delivery? A policy fair in form would require the same request for "hernia leave of absence" or any other operable surgery anticipated. Yet such a neutral policy might be discriminatory because of pregnancy among women of the ages of fertility is probably greater than for men with predictable surgery or disability. Therefore, such a policy would place a greater burden on women and prove an adverse effect.

Although the courts have repeatedly decided that maternity must be treated as any other temporary disability and the Supreme Court is expected to rule decisively on this issue soon, few firms or educational institutions have eliminated policies either treating men and women differently or having disparate effects. The issue cited notification of pregnancy, may be a minor one, of nuisance

value rather than substantive deprivation, but illustrates in a less-controversial context the principle that underlies other necessary analyses.

Proposals to modify tenure requirements are perhaps a more controversial subject which also illustrate the need for analytical ability to spot potential adverse effects. Some schools are trying to shorten the time period necessary to serve before receiving tenure by liberalizing the recognition of previous teaching. This may be helpful to women and minorities currently in the tenure stream to reduce their anxiety and vulnerability, but what are its effects on recruiting new women and minority Ph.D.'s or ABD's (all but dissertation) who may be anxious about the shortened time in which to prove themselves simultaneously as competent teachers, researchers and service contributors.

Other proposals have been made to restrict hiring to only Ph.D's relegating the ABD to a glorified assistantship without the tenure clock beginning until they have the doctorate. Again, this may ease the pressure on those hired but it may drive away potential recruits who want to know they have full status as Instructors in the tenure stream. Still others propose women should waive previous teaching time toward tenure because colleges won't hire those with three or more years already to their credit. These rules differ at institutions and the sociologist can help clarify the differing value perspectives, gains and losses in terms of minority groups and women as one factor in the decision-

making process.

Third, management skills are essential to implementing affirmative action. Negotiating with department chairpersons, deans, vice-presidents and the president goes well beyond setting goals and timetables, the first step in an affirmative action plan. Management means helping to promote the underlying purposes of the legislation in the face of widespread groaning at the high cost of compliance with federal requirements of all sorts. Affirmative action is a good opportunity to test out some of the new ideas about post bureaucratic leadership and innovative organization (Bennis, 1970). Pyramidal, centralized, functionally specialized, impersonal bureaucracies have been deemed to be out of synchronization with contemporary realities. I suggest affirmative action is one such reality.

The catalog of promises made in plan after plan under headings of "Identification of Problem Areas and Corrective Actions" recite a litany of "mea culpas" that most administrators do not remotely grasp. Consider the implications of this passage:

> "Women and minorities have not had the opportunity to serve on policy-making committees in the past. Every effort will be made to see that they are proportionally represented on all decision-making bodies."

Or the biases which need to be overcome with this promise:

> Our company does recognize that newly hired employee cannot be expected to perform as well as the employee with more experience, therefore, we provide whatever training and guidance that is necessary. Some new employees, both black and white, because of their background and lack of experience, will need more training than others, which we will make every effort to provide

> them with, so that they will develop into employees who are capable, who belong, and who are welcome. (Letter from AG, Exec. Vice President 1969, Pennsylvania Power and Light)

In one company, in response to a survey of women employees, the company was asked to have more training sessions to encourage interest in striving for female management positions . . . promote women from within the Company. When asked to identify obstacles, women cited:

> Isolation . . . Not knowing the right people . . . The demand for women to prove themselves or in continually to do the job better than a man has in the past . . . A woman seems to have to prove herself one step farther than any man is required. (Pennsylvania Power and Light, 1975).

The sampling above barely scratches the surface of the myriad types of problems raised by equal employment and affirmative action laws. Companies and universities are virtually expected to alter the social system in which their institution is encased. Larger companies have entire departments, albeit small, devoted to these tasks, working within and outside in the community to promote social change. Few of these personnel have had any training in human relations, conflict resolution or systemic change.

The plethora of ads in The New York Times or the Chronicle of Higher Education mechanically repeating the HEW Guidelines mandate for:

> "New staff position in the President's Office. Responsibilites include implementing, monitoring, coordinating and updating University Affirmative Action Program . . .Minimum qualifications include Bachelor's degree or equivalent, knowledge of equal opportunity laws and regulations, experience in higher education,

> training in data collection and analysis and ability to communicate effectively. (Lehigh University ad April 8, 1974, Chronicle of Higher Education.)

One is hard pressed to determine what training would best equip a candidate for such a position, the duties of which radiate like spoles on a wheel from the above core description. For the adventurous, the foolish, or the seriously committed, the field offers a tremendous challenge. To the sociologist, it offers the opportunity to test many theories, methods and skills the competent social science researcher should master in a lifetime. The new post bureaucratic structures, if Bennis and his colleagues are correct, will have some unique characteristics:

> They will be adaptive, rapidly changing temporary systems, (author's italics) organized around problems-to-be-solved by groups of relative strangers with diverse professional skills. The groups will be arranged on organic rather than mechanical models; they will evolve in response to problems rather than to programmed expectations. People will be evaluated, not in a rigid vertical hierarchy according to rank and status, but flexibly, according to competence . . . Adaptive, problem-solving, temporary systems of diverse specialists, linked together by coordinating executives in an organic flux--this is the organizational form that will gradually replace bureaucracy.

The role of affirmative action officer is a leadership role on the cutting edge of that new organizational form, commanding collaboration and cooperation to be effective, not conflict. Redistributing power among the constituencies of a university, developing a team approach welcoming new members freely, understanding the dynamic interaction among differing value systems,

and inventing creative solutions to chronic, tiresome problems of inequality and tyranny require the sensitivity and flexibility too often associated with "feminine" characteristics. As Bennis concludes, in offering his "agricultural model of leadership:"

> (It) is often construed as "passive" or "weak" or "soft" or more popularly "permissive," and generally dismissed with the same uneasy, patronizing shrug one usually reserves for women who try, however clumsily, to play a man's game. The fact is that the role of leadership described here is clearly more demanding and formidable than any other historical precedent, from king to Pope.

In summary, it is not my intention to insist upon women or minorities or sociologists as the model for the new role of affirmative action officer, but merely to highlight the congruencies between sociological practice--especially for women and affirmative action. Ability to relate and understand diverse groups, to deal with face-to-face interaction and large formal groups, in rapid succession, to apply quantitative and qualitative research methods simultaneously and to know the latest significant legal cases impinging on equal employment opportunity add up to the type of feedback relationship among theory, methods and application we in this section seek.

APPENDIX A

(Higher Education Guidelines - Executive Order 11246)

60-2.22 Responsibility for implementation

(a) An executive of the contractor should be appointed as director or manager of company Equal Opportunity Programs. Depending upon the size and geographical alignment of the company, this may be his or her sole responsibility. He or she should be given the necessary top management support and staffing to execute the assignment. His or her identity should appear on all internal and external communications on the company's Equal Opportunity Programs. His or her responsibilities should include, but not necessarily be limited to:

(1) Developing policy statements, affirmative action programs, internal and external communication techniques.

(2) Assisting in the identification of problem areas.

(3) Assisting line management in arriving at solutions to problems.

(4) Designing and implementing audit and reporting systems that will:

(i) Measure effectiveness of the contractor's programs.

(ii) Indicate need for remedial action.

(iii) Determine the degree to which the contractor's goals and objectives have been attained.

(5) Serve as liaison between the contractor and enforcement agencies.

(6) Serve as liaison between the contractor and minority

organizations, women's organizations and community action groups concerned with employment opportunities of minorities and women.

(7) Keep management informed of latest developments in the entire equal opportunity area.

(b) Line responsibilities should include, but not be limited to, the following:

(1) Assistance in the identification of problem areas and establishment of local and unit goals and objectives.

(2) Active involvement with local minority organizations, women's organizations, community action groups and community service programs.

(3) Periodic audit of training programs, hiring and promotion patterns to remove impediments to the attainment of goals and objectives.

(4) Regular discussions with local managers, supervisors and employees to be certain the contractor's policies are being followed.

(5) Review of the qualifications of all employees to insure that minorities and women are given full opportunities for transfers and promotions.

(6) Career counseling for all employees.

(7) Periodic audit to insure that each location is in compliance in area such as:

(i) Posters are properly displayed.

(ii) All facilities, including company housing, which the contractor maintains for the use and benefit of his employees, are in fact desegregated, both in policy and use. If the contractor provides facilities such as dormitories, locker rooms

and rest rooms, they must be comparable for both sexes.

(iii) Minority and female employees are afforded a full opportunity and are encouraged to participate in all company sponsored educational, training, recreational and social activities.

(8) Supervisors should be made to understand that their work performance is being evaluated on the basis of their equal employment opportunity efforts and results, as well as other criteria.

(9) It shall be the responsibility of supervisors to take actions to prevent harassment of employees placed through affirmative action efforts.

APPENDIX B

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